

SCALING THE LANDSCAPE OF HISTORY: *EXPOSITION*

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Lopez Museum and Library

Ortigas Center, Pasig City

The nuances of our relationship with Spain and America are explored in *Exposition*. The exhibition takes the projects that Spain undertook to learn more about its colony as its point of entry. Curator Dorothea Garing explains that it was researcher Norman Sison’s vision to focus on the continuing relevance of Spanish; he “wanted to flesh out why we have a closer affinity to American culture as opposed to Spanish culture when, in fact, we were under the latter much longer.” Unfortunately, Sison died before he could execute it. The current staff of the museum chose to interpret his vision by focusing on items that are abundant in the museum’s collection—rare antique maps and books, plus their keynote nineteenth century artworks. The works of Cian Dayrit and Liv Vinluan are featured alongside these.

The exhibit takes its name from the 1887 *Exposición de las Islas Filipinas* in Madrid, during which Spain particularly highlighted its conquest of the Philippines. Botanical specimens from the islands were showcased at the Palacio de Cristal, especially built for the event as an elaborate greenhouse, suggesting how Spain viewed the Philippines—as a rich possession to be controlled, developed, and set off in an attractive light to signify Spain’s civilizing influence as a superior culture.

The worldview of the Spaniards is evident from the start of their discovery and colonization of the Philippines. A series of old maps made by Western cartographers shows the very gradual progression of how they came to grasp the geographical arrangement of the islands. At times, Garing explains, the maps were deliberately misleading so that other foreign explorers would not be able to find the islands and exploit their riches. In cartography as in life, it seems that the colonizers were determined to shape the islands according to their will. Cian Dayrit comments on the role of a map as a political construct with his own fabric maps that include actual commentary in archaic Tagalog.

The exposition was intended to display the wealth and power of Spain as these are evinced through one of its colonies, but it was not as successful as the glowing officially sanctioned reports made it seem, the journal *El Globo* reveals. There is a suggestion of desperation on the part of Spain, which was losing its hold on a colony that had grown into a young upstart. Ironically, this development was due to Spain's own actions: contrary to the common impression, Garing explains, Spain found it necessary to educate the natives sufficiently, especially in the area of language, as Spain needed translators, although the effort was not without its difficulties and its success was limited. As much as we may bristle at its air of superiority, Spain's enriching influences on the Filipinos' cultural development are evident, particularly in the art of Félix Resurrección Hidalgo and Juan Luna, and in the education of the *ilustrados*, including Andres Bonifacio, pictured in an engraving by Guillermo Tolentino along with the Luna brothers, Mabini, and Rizal.

The ambivalence is suggested by the art displayed. Liv Vinluan's installation *Ang Cabilogan nang Isang Cuadranggulo* consists of two components of nineteenth-century European undergarment (corselet and cage crinoline) and two items of nineteenth-century Philippine dress (a *camisa* and a *saya* with a *kola*) arranged on an illuminated platform. On the one hand, it may be interpreted as a commentary on Spain's attempt to bend natives to its will. On the waistband of the skirt is the terse comment, "Huwag pilitin maging cuadro ang bilog."

But following the artist's statement about the work, one can interpret the work in a less negative light: "The main image that I want to convey is of a Filipino dress—stepped and supported by cage-like European underwear. I think that the image of native clothing, supported and braced from within by western accoutrements[,] pushes upfront ideas about reform, colonial policy, and what lies ahead with regard to this issue. . . . Here we have an illuminated image of the Filipino, braced *naman* from beneath by the governance of a non-Filipino."

The persistent interest of Spain in the colony's natural resources more than in the welfare of the Philippine people is emphasized by the studies of local flora. Photographs of Palacio de Cristal are a reminder of this. Further evidence is the publication of the now famous Fr. Manuel Blanco's *Flora de Filipinas*, displayed in another room of the Museum. As a missionary, Blanco garnered knowledge of over 1,200 species of herbs through interactions with the natives. He did not intend to write such a manuscript, much less to publish it, but the Queen (Isabel II) herself and other distinguished people recommended its publication. A second edition was published posthumously.

Vinluan's *Ang mangga Anggulo nang Isang Bilog* provides a striking commentary. A watercolor showing a snake preying on a friar, the work suggests that Blanco and the native wisdom he had acquired were swallowed up by the Augustinian order and other larger powers that sought to utilize his work for their own gain. Lending support to this idea is a cover illustration by Hidalgo accurately depicting Philippine plants, which lost out in a contest to an Art Nouveau cover with stylized leaves by an Augustinian. More scientific American botanical research was presented as a counterpoint to Blanco's anecdotal compilation.

Vinluan, however, has a different take on her work. In a statement, she explains that despite Father Blanco's reservations, the book was published for public consumption. In that case, the snake would be the public.

Sison envisioned the exhibit as focusing on language, so language issues are brought out by the display of Spanish-period catechisms for the different language groups of the islands.

Lightning Studies: CTCCCs draws together quotes from actual reports of the Bureau of Health and the Bureau of Science during the American colonial period in a chart, a work entitled *Pasá Pasâ*, that spans the width of a wall. Explains the group: "Playing with the idea of bruises (pasâ) or bruising, Lightning Studies: CTCCCs looks into notions of civility and public good, through the public health and hygiene system that were put in place. This [project] is translated into operationalizing systems of presenting data and information—the production of charts and diagrams of statistics and other reports—[and] makes use of specific languages and modes of showing/ explaining to the public that supposedly benefits [from] it."

The plurality of views presented in *Exposition* is in keeping with its vision to present history not simply as a timeline of events but as a collection of various perspectives on significant occurrences and figures shaped by our culture and concerns. New discoveries and insights are introduced to challenge common misperceptions about our history and further nuance our understanding of the role of colonial powers in our development.

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